

# Messy Vitalities: From Forms of Life to the Life of Forms

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By their own admission, Jamie Allen and Bernhard Garnicnig suggest that *My Holy Nacho* is a network-sculpture made out of misunderstandings. Or, alternatively, a work borne out of the productive limits of miscommunication. Indeed, the mis-communicative limits of murky and misty systems generate all features of the project: from the title of the piece (after a misheard remark alluding to the name of László Moholy-Nagy and his “telephone pictures”, on which the piece is chiefly inspired), to the ten contingent, telepresent, geographical, industrial and artisanal processes upon which one single object is mysteriously subjected, to the status of the artists themselves who withhold these processes from one another, deliberately suspending their knowledge about the object until its final unboxing.

In this brief text, I would like to reflect on one single point blindly, and in so doing extrapolate some important philosophical stakes in Allen and Garnicnig’s paradoxical approach. What becomes surprising, to me at least, are the reflective affinities one would not normally associate with such a work: yet those same affinities reflect a twist of affairs characteristic of our contemporary life dependent on invasive systems, manufacturing processes and algorithmic rhythms. According to Allen and Garnicnig, *My Holy Nacho* takes as its lynchpin the heightened gaps characterized by Moholy-Nagy’s playful ambiguities of instruction via the heightened gaps in telephoned communication, but here it comes through the widespread *infrastructure of electronic media*: a powerful mediation on automated forms of production which make up the material background of our shared lives. Some prefer to label this condition “post-Internet” or “post-digital”:<sup>8</sup> an effect that some art circles profess to admire, some to fear, where the cultural

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<sup>8</sup> See Florian Cramer, “What is the Post-Digital”, in *Post-Digital Research* (APRJA), vol 3, issue 1, 2014 (<http://www.aprja.net/?p=1318>). Last accessed 12th March 2015. See also the forthcoming collection of essays D. M. Berry & M Dieter (ed.), *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

affordances generated from adopting the distribution of computational protocols are worthy of reflection, rather than simply reflecting on those techniques solely.

Countering this, one might consider how a rough ground composes many different types of materialities in electronic media. They might compose of: commercial fiber cables, the desperation of plug sockets, the production of aluminium alloys, the bureaucracy of the network, the warm hum of server farms, the po-faced lunacy of Twitter bots, the pathological updating of platform feeds and the smooth intelligence of encrypted numbers. In Matthew Fuller's words, it might also characterize "an interrelationship with knowledge and time management processes, intellectual property regimes, database and software design, content control, access structuring, metadata, archiving, and the use and generation of new document and information types."<sup>9</sup>

All of these infrastructures, whose sleek functioning relies on the core of complex automation, act as the technical background in which old and new generations implicitly find themselves, navigating it through acceptance, benevolence or resistance. More often than not, we just put up with their silent functioning when we are busy doing something else. How does one critically approach this background? Through interrogation and critique? Fine, but in interrogating the background, we risk interrogating the ecological means for movement, of limits, of changes to and within thinking and making: akin to pulling our eyes from our sockets so that we might quickly grasp that background before it crumbles into the ether of further distraction.

Many have, no doubt, been quick to brush *My Holy Nacho* with a tagline that conflates art production to that of autonomous Internet process. It is accurate to a point, but misses the bewildering array of concrete material, geo-social transformations that these so-called autonomous processes depend on, as well as the aforementioned gaps from which it is composed. Whilst these transformations reflect the unnerving reliance of ignored infrastructure that hides platforms, *My Holy Nacho's coup-de-grace* destroys any ideal notion that such backgrounds can be made transparent or logically coherent. Against popular developments that support mining knowledge from big data, instant delivery of information and services that spoon-feed teases and updates into the mouths of fan culture, Allen and Garnicnig refocus the ideal desires of primitive and elementary information towards its real character: *diversity, manipulation, opacity and complexity*.

The problem, of course, is that public perception and Silicon Valley-led libertarianism still associate computation and big data with some degree of utopian magic: one that sufficiently quantifies, even *disambiguates* the messiness of life, attempting to *secure* transparent communication that significantly improves any human foundation when applied with sufficient

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9 Matthew Fuller. *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005, p. 3.

enthusiasm and gusto. Yet the symbolic manipulations of computation and network protocols are subject to natural limits which are just as significant and salient as physical ones. To what extent do these limits matter, not just for infrastructure, but also its aesthetic? To what extent do limits matter when the critical systems of finance, trading, commerce, security and intelligence both rely on and are *vulnerable* to such limits? Crucially, what becomes of ideals which ignore these limits, or when limits mutate the ideals?

### Lebensformen

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You'd be right in assuming that these are key philosophical stakes. Those stakes have, under certain lights, always been with us irrespective of digital pervasiveness. In my eyes, *My Holy Nacho* imparts one core principle: one in which any attempt to secure transparent communication (so endemic to logical deduction and digital transmission) effaces or completely disregards the very *forms of life* to which communication, intelligibility and understanding *become possible and also impossible*. Often enough, the calculable efficacy of computation is used as a yardstick to measure such objective data, as if data just speaks for itself, literally and uncompromisingly. Instead, *My Holy Nacho* speaks of wanting to deliberately trouble this efficacy: to poke its formal limits, suspending consequence for unlimited effect.

By evoking “forms of life” (*Lebensformen*), it is clear that we are treading in Wittgensteinian waters. Wittgenstein, being Wittgenstein, used the term sparingly without explanation – a mere five times in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) –, giving rise to a number of ambiguous interpretations and readings. Quite generally, “forms of life” hits on the precarious, relative *givenness* of human language dependent on culture, context and history. It is the impersonal background over which we have no control, no way of attempting to impart determined instruction, and yet it must be necessary for imparting the very meaning of control and instruction in the first place. Alternatively, a form of life becomes critical to human understanding and shared meaning where it denotes “the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language”<sup>10</sup> (PI § 206). These shared modes of acknowledgement cannot be explained, nor interpreted literally. Words and interpretations rely on these shared modes and forms that are saturated with the unexplainable vitality of life as their base.

Multiple definitions aside, the one that appears to be the most favorable to me, is Stanley Cavell's famous take on Wittgenstein's *Investigations* whereby he illuminates the skeptical *assumptions*

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10 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S Hacker and J Schulte). London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009 [1953], p. 168.

of a form of life: one that he takes to be a difficulty of human limits, as detailed by this long, and much cited passage from *Must We Mean What We Say?*:

“We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place... just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, for what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls ‘forms of life.’ Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying.”<sup>11</sup>

Notice here three elements to bring into the discussion; firstly the ability not only to project, but also to teach and instruct words into certain contexts. It comes with the expected aim of treating shared projections as rational rays, designed to pierce the literal depths of shared meaning, but whose limits stop short of doing so. It is hard not to consider that this ability to project, whilst retaining an inability to *never absolutely* connect with each other, explicitly lies at the heart of Moholy-Nagy’s instructions for the composition of his “telephone pictures”. Moholy-Nagy willfully relied on and recognized this lack of assurance, bequeathing communicative *ambiguity*. Whilst limits might be terrifying for an analytically trained logician, it becomes potentially liberating for the artist, who may long for *surprise*. For any ability to share information, or project words, we must already be predisposed to miscommunicate.

Secondly, look at Cavell’s choice of words: a “whirl of organism”. A description that presupposes a sense of *vitality* behind a creature of language: depicting, and reflecting on its states, its ability to confuse ideal matters of disembodied knowledge. Cavell follows Wittgenstein by pressing on these implicitly difficult moments: where the very means to secure a logically perfect, standardized, literal communication, sharing exact meaning often covers other shared modes of life. As Wittgenstein pointed out in a helpful metaphor:

“We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!”<sup>12</sup> (PI § 107)

11 Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 [1969], p. 52.

12 Wittgenstein, *op. cit.* p. 94.

Which brings us to the third element: *friction*, being the necessary component for supporting forms of life, never explanation nor ideal states of correctness. Friction *lingers*. Friction becomes inscrutable, signaling itself only at the moment when ordinary methods of communication cease, or become limited: when there is a gap, in which forms of life rub, chafe, grate, rasp, resist, drag communication into new areas of despair, tragedy, hope and aesthetic interrogation. This is Cavell's signature move: to fuse together Wittgenstein's skeptical self-questioning within a form of life, together with J. L. Austin's ordinary language philosophy of performative utterances.

In her companion piece "How to do Things with Email: *My Holy Nacho*", Mela Dávila Freire helpfully explores this Austin connection, the role of the project administration and its relevance in the wider pragmatist actions in creating the work (in this case sending emails to instruct other companies). It is not just communication which is key, but the *performative* aspects of language which matter here: where linguistic utterances actually *do something* (i.e. they perform an action) when uttered. What Cavell brought to the table was a profound *skeptical* stance which Austin sidestepped, or considered unimportant to ordinary language; where our performative utterances suddenly lose traction, or gain a sense of the tragic. Our ordinary lives are thoroughly saturated with what Cavell calls the "threat" of skepticism: it is the threat of limitations, the threat to knowledge, even world-views that language creates which *chagrins* us. Yet, nonetheless language remains pervasive as *the* only shared medium from which we can communicate from if communicative instruction is to happen whatsoever. We *want* to walk, but *cannot* do so without friction. Our skeptical limits have to be *lived as messy, uncertain vitalities, if we are to live our shared lives at all*.

In an interview with Regine Debatty, Allen and Garnicnig allude to performative questions of collaboration, and spell out exactly how collaboration might (in my reading) unveil itself as a form of life that imparts this lived, skeptical sensibility:

"Actual collaboration is in many ways impossible. Collaboration is more about the love of misunderstanding and the impossibility of knowing than most people think. It is not about feedback, but pushing each other's ideas and intuitions forward, developing unique things together. Imagine two people cooking together, for example, discussing each condiment and about whether now is a good moment to stir – that is not really how it works. Someone nudges ideas and materials this way or that, and then someone else comes along and nudges then some other way. That is just how bodies, brains and time work. So the 'artwork' or object in *My Holy Nacho* is not what is being collaborated on, but there are ideas and processes set in motion, suggesting a whole bunch of gaps innate to (particularly digital)

collaborations: the gap between actuality and language, the gap between idea and implementation, and the gap between people in collaboration. The work is ‘about’ those gaps as much as anything else.”<sup>13</sup>

To collaborate as a shared activity is to precisely live ones skepticism: that is to nudge an instruction a certain way without knowing the outcome in advance. This practice of living and embracing one’s skeptical limits, extends to the practice of giving performative instructions: and not only that, *but of also embracing the ambiguities yet to be lived*. To appreciate the absent gaps between us, it must be necessary for collaboration to commence and for instructions to be transmitted. Quoting from the same interview once more:

“Asking someone to perform what might seem highly specific actions (e.g.: ‘coat this object with chrome’) actually highlights the many, many potentials for ambiguity that exist. In a culture of technical documents, the assumptions and interpretations required become greater, not less, in many instances.”<sup>14</sup>

## Formenleben

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We must, then, return to the world in all its ambiguity. What sort of world do we live in today? In what sort of world might Allen and Garnicnig wish to find a lived skepticism?

This skeptical return to a world overrun with online communication is where *My Holy Nacho* finds its rough ground, in refusing to adopt the transparent reveal of data output, the literality of meaning, the truth, the proof of electronic media expanding and disambiguating all communication. Instead it interrogates the skeptical *background* of this logic, by precisely *not* knowing it, only by heightening and prolonging its eventual cloudy effects on us all. *It is computation which now performs, but remains no less skeptical*. Such Cavellian moments resurface when our projections fall flat, when our shared presumptions prove dissonant, and grind away at nothing but the otherness of an impersonal network that spreads, gasps, and moves regardless.

Where Wittgenstein wishes to return to a rough ground, a rough *shared* vital background (and Cavell follows him with Austin in tandem) might we now say that our rough ground occupies a *rough infrastructure of electronic communication*? Might it be that the performative ambiguities of ordinary language have suddenly been strewn across the ordinary infrastructures of planetary communication and protocols? Did this happen when such global digital infrastructures of

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13 Regine Debetty, Jamie Allen & Bernhard Garnicnig, “*My Holy Nacho* – It’s All about the Gaps in Online Communication”, 10th March 2014, in *we-make-money-not-art.com* ([http://we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2014/03/my-holy-nacho.php#VQL\\_3EI2Gt3](http://we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2014/03/my-holy-nacho.php#VQL_3EI2Gt3)). Last accessed 12th March, 2015.

14 Ibid.

mobile platforms, social media, app purchases, twitter feeds, and sharing media altogether became *ordinary*? Has infrastructure itself become profoundly skeptical? Has the collaborative ideal of shared digital communication always been limited?

*My Holy Nacho* coerces a transformation from a background of human telecommunication and natural language, to the strange human and non-human backgrounds of infrastructure, telecommunications and digital transmissions. Putting it differently, we might ask what happens to Wittgenstein's "forms of life", when *digital infrastructures have already constructed a background designed to automate and extend existing communications in a form of life?*

One response might be to uncover *deeper* forms of life behind our age of computation, which automation has not caught up with yet. But this only complicates the problem, and shifts the difficulty away into the routine, safe confines of human life: as if the background to these limits can never be one that escapes human sayings and doings. It is only because *My Holy Nacho* deals competently with non-human material processes that construct the predominant background for shared communication, that a change is provoked.

We might then characterize this as a transformation from forms of life, *into a life of forms*. Or simply even a *life form*. For Wittgenstein and Cavell, the rough ground that constitutes the skeptical ambiguity of human life is a holistic whole: a "whirl" of shared assumptions which an embodied creature negotiates, utterly fraught with its limits. Whereas *My Holy Nacho* seems to shift its weight towards a background of *computational ambiguity*, or *digital miscommunication*, *of the limits inherent to infrastructural form itself*. We might even be speaking of an *automated friction*. What does this mean?

This very friction affecting forms of life are not just matters for human communication but also for machine communication, standardizations, specifications, documents, code, firmware, software, taking orders online, office communications, recommendations, instant messaging, warehouse systems, security servers, email performances to massive leaking of private documents into a public sphere. These forms have *life-form*, and not a life that reconciles easily with our own. Our "own" automated forms of life (not so much literally as our desire would dictate) have become massively extended, automated for ease, but also simultaneously becoming inverted: where we mingle, implicated within the lives of other forms, some self-created, some inherited, most becoming part of the daily grind. The *life of forms* no longer teaches and projects words into different contexts, now formal systems do it too, and worryingly far quicker, and far more ambiguously: sent out by humans, but retreating back as misguided creatures. Algorithmic forms now project instructions into new contexts more than ever before, and all the more obviously, not least because *algorithms are also performative instructions*.

The performativity of code is what Adrian Mackenzie denotes as the nexus of diverse social practices and circulatory processes which takes place, when code is operational and executing instructions.<sup>15</sup> Except these performative utterances are now woven into formal infrastructures. They now have a life of their own: they have an irreducible excess in which code is a written and explicit set of rules, and code is performed in a context which is ambiguous. In discussing the performativity of Austin's speech acts and the practice of coding, Geoff Cox suggests that:

“[a]lthough programming languages are clearly not spoken as such, they express particular qualities that come close to speech acts and even extend our understanding of speech... The act of coding might even be seen as the translation between a problem expressed in human terms of speech and one expressed in a way the computer can interpret, between ambiguous and complex expression and formal logic.”<sup>16</sup>

Even more worryingly, the life of forms are less transparent than Wittgenstein's forms of life, with no appeal to dissolving philosophical problems, just creating new technical frontiers for deeper problems that yield wider incompatibilities, wider frictions, uncontrollable excesses and deeper shared lives of skeptical tragedy.

We might consider such instructions and processes as deliberately ambiguous, yet highly specific formal systems: but formal systems which nonetheless have definite actions that produce excesses of function. Perhaps then, instead of having our lot with miscommunication coming from forms of *life*, where human life is source of this background, the life of *forms* understands multiple *forms* as being the source of a constructed non-human background. Forms that hide in the shadowy corners of phone settings, data collection, verification demands, social media alerts, keystroke captures, exploitable hackers, malicious software and SPAM. Forms that have as many gaps between us and them as they do between other forms.

And so, when then the object is unboxed and exhibited, *My Holy Nacho* becomes an artistic witness towards a background shift that has already taken place: where we do not so much as “walk” (as Wittgenstein would have it) but *spread and manipulate*. We do so with the same level of assumption, the same level of friction, the same level of skepticism between one form and another, the same “whirl of organism” that constitutes agency and performance – all woven into one unknown entity that reflects the performative life of forms back down our equally performative throats.

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15 Adrian Mackenzie, “The Performativity of Code: Software and Cultures of Circulation”, in *Theory, Culture & Society*, February, vol. 22, no. 1: 71-92, 2005 (doi: 10.1177/0263276405048436).

16 Geoff Cox, *Speaking Code: Coding as Aesthetic and Political Expression*. London, MIT Press, 2012, p. 37.